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Political challenges in community-based ecotourism

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) to explore the development of ecotourism in a Taiwanese community after a major earthquake. The study employs interviews with different NGO groups and residents, participant-observation and documentary analysis. Through a political economy lens, the study examines the social and political influences on, and the social and political consequences of, ecotourism development. Results reveal insights into political elements of the community asset base, calling for its inclusion in the existing model. The paper illustrates the challenges of ecotourism development and recognises the importance of attention to differing values if it is to be considered as a sustainable livelihood option in vulnerable communities. In particular we critique the positions of both existing power structures and NGOs, often envisioned as “experts” in the tourism governance process. In this case the imposition of various political values lead to failures in inclusivity, particularly in terms of goal setting, empowerment, leadership, organisational fragmentation and benefit sharing, all of which are important principles of sustainability. Greater attention to the political nature of community-based tourism through the revised SLA model could reduce the many documented cases of hosts being merely objects of development, rather than active subjects.

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Introduction

15 Despite their negative consequences, natural disasters can create the opportunity for innovations or new markets in tourism (Faulkner, 2001; Laws, Prideaux, & Chon, 2007). One of the major impacts of such events is their immediate impact on the livelihoods of communities. These may be particularly profound in rural areas that are away from the initial response of disaster management in urban areas. Niche tourism has often been used as a livelihoods solution following such crises, for example, through developing ecotourism in peripheral communities which can bring potential economic benefits. The designation of Yushu in the Qinghai Province of China as a “plateau ecotourism city” (China Daily, 2010) following an earthquake there in 2010 is illustrative of such solutions.

20 Of course, such a designation is as much political as it is pragmatic, based on the popularity of ecotourism as a cure-all for the challenges of rural livelihoods. Several authors (e.g. Duffy, 2002) have criticised this “holy grail” approach to ecotourism in policy-making, particularly evident surrounding the International Year of Ecotourism in 2002, which sought to (perhaps unfairly) give this subsector a “leadership role for the rest of the industry in promoting sustainable development” (Butcher, 2007, p. 151). Yet, ecotourism itself is a highly “contested term in terms of operational definitions, subject

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to varying interpretations that are, however, almost without exception, rooted in Western ideology” (Cater, 2006, p. 36). Therefore, the application of ecotourism is inevitably contextual and value-based, and thus embedded within dynamic “political landscapes (which) are notoriously unstable” (Buckley, 2002, p. 202). Hence, in examining ecotourism’s contribution to livelihoods, there is a need to pay attention to the political and value-based elements of this process.

A useful lens through which the lives of rural citizens can be examined is the sustainable livelihoods framework. This framework enables us to “understand and analyze the complex livelihoods of rural people” (Lee, 2005, p. 216), through assessing the context, livelihood resources, livelihood strategies and institutional processes inherent in a development situation (Scoones, 1998). The sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) has been particularly applied in sub-Saharan settings, particularly by the UK Department for International Development (DfID), especially those communities deemed to have a high degree of vulnerability. At the core of the framework are community resources or “the basic material and social, tangible and intangible assets that people have in their possession...such livelihood assets may be seen as the ‘capital’ base from which different productive streams are derived, from which livelihoods are constructed” (Scoones, 1998, p. 7). These were placed broadly into categories of natural, economic, human and social assets, with later refinement in DfID models of physical and financial descriptors in place of economic capital. Although not specifically focused on tourism, the model has proved useful in evaluating baselines and changes to community assets caused by tourism development (Lee, 2005; Tao & Wall, 2009; Wang & Cater, 2015), adding to other conceptual models of fractions of capital in tourism studies, such as that by Hampton and Christensen (2007) and Mykeltun (2009). However, there has been some further degree of refinement, for example in the context of coastal tourism, where cultural capital was added to the SLA framework due to “the cultural resources (heritage, customs, traditions) [being] very much a feature of local livelihoods” (Cater & Cater, 2007, p. 114), as well as being seen as central to the tourism product.

Previously, studies by the Overseas Development Institute and DfID undertook to examine the role of political capital in the development of micro-watershed development in India (Baumann, 2000; Baumann & Sinha, 2001). These applications of the SLA from a natural resources perspective make a useful starting point for this paper where we aim to reaffirm the inclusion of political capital but in a nature-based tourism development setting. This paper emerges from an assessment of the asset base of the SLA in the rural community of Taomi in central Taiwan. This community faced a particular challenge to its livelihoods after a major earthquake which dramatically increased its vulnerability (Wang and Cater, 2015). A major aspect of redevelopment was the promotion of a rural ecotourism product. The study was carried out using a longitudinal ethnographic approach which provided a body of rich and nuanced data through the use of interviews, focus groups and participant and non-participant observation techniques. Although findings revealed that some of the changes were positive, and that the location is now recognised for its nature-based offerings, the study also revealed a high degree of internal and external conflict throughout this process. Findings illustrate that using the SLA in this setting required a focus on the political nature of tourism development, which was lacking in the currently applied model. Specifically, findings pointed to NGOs requiring a greater understanding of the local cultural politics of governance, participation and leadership if they are to establish an effective, meaningful and sustainable ecotourism initiative. Thus, this paper explores the under-researched *political* influences in sustainable development at a community level (Butcher, 2007).

The political nature of ecotourism development

It is broadly recognised that the political realm has a dynamic relationship with the assets outlined in the SLA (e.g. Dredge & Jenkins, 2007; Hall, 2000). Work on power structures in tourism (Church & Coles, 2007) and the political economy of tourism (Mosedale, 2011) have contributed to this debate. Furthermore, an awareness of the value-based nature of tourism, highlighted by the examination of

ethics and tourism (Fennell, 2006) is also relevant. Some of the so-called “new” forms of tourism, such as ecotourism, are so value-laden that it often becomes difficult to clearly define what they mean. This is especially true in the application of sustainable principles, for their use in tourism development is always “highly political...the goal of sustainability is not a given, it is a contested concept that we need to be arguing for” (Hall, 2008, p. 262).

Therefore, this paper suggests, as have others previously albeit in different contexts (e.g. Baumann, 2000; Baumann & Sinha, 2001), that another form of community capital, namely political capital, should also be considered in the asset base of the SLA. Broadly speaking, in a welfare sense, political capital has been conceptualised previously as “the empowering role of resources [used by actors] for the realisation of outcomes that advance actors’ perceived interests” (Hicks & Misra, 1993, p. 671). In the context of the present study, political capital is concerned with examining unequal power distribution among the different levels or members of a community (Anderson, Locker, & Nugent, 2002; Glavovic, Scheyvens, & Overton, 2002; Grootaert, 1998). Moreover, we attempt to position political capital as an endogenous component of the SLA, and one which represents actors’ rights as a claim to an asset and which also encompasses the exogenous links between actors and external institutions (Baumann, 2000). Naturally, such a definition will be inextricably linked to values, given the dynamic and unstable nature of political landscapes alluded to above. Ergo, this study also aims to contribute to the ongoing evolution of our understanding of political capital and its operational role within the SLA framework (Baumann, 2000).

Context of the study

The targeted research site was the Taomi Village community (hereafter referred to as “Taomi”), in Puli Township in Nantou County in central Taiwan. On 21 September 1999, an earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale devastated central Taiwan (Huang & Min, 2002), and the area suffered severe devastation, as a result of being in close proximity to the epicentre. Of the 369 households in Taomi, 168 were completely destroyed, and 60 were damaged in some way. Most residents lost their livelihoods, and in the initial post-earthquake period, major NGO and university groups were involved in reconstruction with a focus on developing an ecotourism product.

As in other countries, ecotourism has been a popular tourism development strategy in Taiwan with government endorsements in 2004 and 2006 white papers (Wang, 2010). The community economy before the earthquake was a declining traditional agricultural society and had a low socio-economic profile. However, the development of ecotourism has given livelihood alternatives to residents, with approximately 120 residents now employed in tourism, and represented by several community organisations, the Community Development Association, the Taomi Ecotourism Association and the Leisure-Agriculture Park Association (He, personal communication, December 20, 2007). The tourism industry currently comprises 17 home-stays, two campsites, 10 small restaurants and 30 eco-guides. Most home-stays have five rooms to accommodate tourists’ arrival (in line with a national government tax-free policy (He & Chen, 2007)), but a few home-stays have more than five. Taomi receives approximately 20,000 domestic tourists a year in tour groups (Wang, 2010), although there are more independent tourists that may not be captured by statistics.

This study provided an exploration of community ecotourism development in the single case of Taomi. The basic design of this study was ethnographic, comprising in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant-observation and documentary analysis for the data collection process. The entire process of data collection involved one of the researchers, who is fluent in Mandarin, spending eight months in Taomi to gather relevant data in 2007. The researcher had to build up a trusting relationship with all participants, paying particular sensitivity to “ethical issues and respectable norms of reciprocity” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 78). Individual interviews were conducted with 26 key residents and 10 “experts” who were involved in NGO organisations, being “information-rich” respondents (Bramwell & Meyer, 2007). The former included the village mayor, the head and members of the ecotourism association, the owner of an ecotourism business and other local

Q4 residents. The latter comprised members of NGO groups, such as the New Homeland Foundation (NHF), the Endemic Species Research Institute (ESRI) and Hsin-Shih University, and other key experts or scholars. Different open-ended, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used with these two groups to probe for deeper evidence or data in relation to significant events from the informants. Follow-up interviews were found necessary in several cases to clarify and further explore their perceptions and attitudes. Focus group discussions with 15 residents in three respective sessions were undertaken to obtain local opinions, and memories of experiences during the ecotourism development process. Furthermore, participant observation was employed to research the interactions of Taomi residents in some key activities and meetings concerning ecotourism issues. To add to observation evidence, the researcher took field notes, photos and digital video footage to record evidence of how the component parts of the SLA impacted upon tourism development in the field. In particular, evidence was gathered that pointed to political capital underpinning a longer-term perspective of development. Documentation including minutes from community meetings, planning forums, training workshops, the Taomi Ecotourism Journal, Taomi maps, books, reports and newspaper internet sites were all used to confirm and interrogate evidence from sources other than the three different interview formats. This iterative study of all local stakeholders was seen as comprehensive and rigorous.

An understanding of the perceptions, beliefs and decisions of Taomi residents was gained by applying the theory of social representations to explain matters of social exchange and conflict regarding everyday knowledge (Moscovici, 1981; Pearce, Moscardo, & Ross, 1996). These representations are presented here as direct quotes from the interviews, with an anonymous indicator of the interviewees, using the shorthand N (NGO) or R (Resident). Social representations are not only informed by how people see the world, as they are also decided by social interactions and communications within their society (Purkhardt, 1993). Such a theoretical lens fits well with the SLA, given that this seeks to “put people at the centre of development” (Ashley & Carney, 1999, p. 45). Analysis of the interviews used coding to generate categories and themes from the data, involving three steps of open coding (deconstruction), axial coding (construction), and confirmation (selective coding) (Gobo, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Given the core focus on the SLA, the initial coding focused on the presence of the six themes identified within this framework, following the approach of Tao and Wall (2009). This gave an initial structure for analysis that could be developed and further analysed. During this process, however, it became apparent that there were deep political aspects to the development process on a micro-level which could be interpreted as an expression of political capital. This emphasised the importance of an analysis that incorporates political economy in tourism development (Mosedale, 2011; Mowforth & Munt 2008). In considering the political dimensions of capital in the SLA, the findings were presented under the broad categories of social and political influences, and the social and political consequences (Cloeke, Crang, & Goodwin, 2005) of ecotourism operations in Taomi. Interpretation of these themes is elucidated by direct quotes (translated from Mandarin spoken in interviews) from 17 of the respondents, which are deemed as representative of the sample.

165 **Social and political influences on livelihoods**

Lack of goal setting

Having a strong goal and vision that community members are prepared to be involved in, and then act upon, is a foundation for sustainable development. After the earthquake, the local community of Taomi approached the New Homeland Foundation (NHF), a development NGO to assist them in the rebuilding process. The NHF approached organisations with expertise in ecological surveys and tourism development, and goals were discussed among NGO groups and the core members of local associations. However, the different NGO groups had contrasting values and conceptual approaches stemming from their different disciplinary orientations. For example, the professional field of the ESRI was surveying ecological resources and the environment. The ESRI team completed all the surveying

175 of Taomi's ecological resources in the initial rebuilding period. When the results of the ecological survey were finalised by the ESRI, they suggested that because of the rich ecological species in the local area, the Taomi community had to develop ecotourism, even though this did not include attention to traditional tourism services:

180 N8, a key person from the Chichi Endemic Species Research Institute centre gave advice on taking the direction of ecotourism or ecological education... So, the ecological resources did not fully include services; he didn't include services and tourism in his advice, just the ecological resources involving education and learning, so I think these are two different directions. (N6)

In contrast, the Shih-Hsin University group, approached for assistance with tourism, designed tourism training programmes for local residents, and simultaneously held discussions with some key residents to draw up a plan for a leisure-tourism industry in Taomi which would include traditional agriculture, with ecotourism development to be just one part of the leisure-tourism industry:

190 ecology is just a vehicle, a vehicle for our natural resources. The development of one industry is just one of the links. I am talking about supply and demand; ecology is just one link on the supply side, and there are many modes of supply. ... So if the Taomi community gets into developing ecotourism, it's not just a matter of capitalizing on the species. (N7)

These different goals were clearly based on different value sets (political capital) of the different stakeholders, but with implications for other community assets. While the former direction had natural assets at its core, it did not recognise the importance of human capital in developing sufficient skills for tourism development. Indeed, local residents expressed concerns to create a more multi-focused approach to generate more employment opportunities. The two NGO groups had some significantly different views on the different goals of developing the local industry, views reflecting particular political standpoints:

200 N8 also believes capitalism is very awful. I think the range is the real problem, not capitalism itself. Free competition is only suitable within a very small range ... you cannot operate ecotourism that way in a conservative community. Ecotourism is socially-oriented, not capital-oriented. (N4)

The two groups offering their professional knowledge and expertise from different fields had different ideologies informing their individual professional approaches. A healthy interactive relationship between both sides appears to have been lacking. These political agendas seem to have been neglected in the early stages of development and as a result have undermined a range of other governance issues discussed in this paper.

Lack of empowerment

As described earlier, empowerment is a complex and highly contextualised combination of factors. For example, as well as the question of empowerment, there is the consideration of actual representation, for "participatory democracy is both a matter of *right* and *capacity* to participate" (Jamal & Getz, 2000, p. 176). Indeed, it is apparent that empowerment in the Taomi community was not as broad-based as was first expected. Respondents' comments indicated that participation and communication aspects were particularly lacking. As Timothy (2002) has suggested, public participation in decision-making is one of the pillars of community empowerment, reflecting legal rights and opportunities (Smith, 1984). Many researchers note that residents' participation in the ecotourism development decision-making process requires taking into consideration their opinions and concerns (Fennell & Dowling, 2003; Hall et al., 1997; Scheyvens, 1999; Sofield, 2003). The local associations often held meetings concerned with the ecotourism development. Although these were open to all the residents and the other groups, a lack of understanding reduced the residents' capacity to participate effectively:

- 220 I could go and take part in these meetings, but there was hardly anybody who wanted to do that. I think they felt that ecotourism was something very boring; and even if they listened they wouldn't be able to understand what was going on anyway. (R10)

In particular, it was individuals or groups whose own benefits might be affected who were involved in the decision-making processes (Lankford & Howard, 1994; Madrigal, 1993; Sofield, 2003).

- 225 A further element contributing to the shortfalls in political capital was a lack of effective communication. The interviews uncovered a number of instances of inadequate communication undermining community empowerment, particularly through the NGOs. An example was when the NHF and ESRI started to conduct a trial operation of the Taomi ecotourism industry in September 2001 without the endorsement of the Shih-Hsin University group:

- 230 No tourists should be allowed in and businesses could not be opened to the public before the community was completely ready. But he responded that the local residents could not wait. Well, the residents had not communicated anything of that sort to me ... they were just talking amongst themselves. And at the time we were doing things together and I think N1 should have told me about the information in advance, not just gone and revealed the news on his own. What he did amounted to a violation of our initial ideals and agreement. (N7)

- 235 Conflicts such as these damaged the originally established communication mechanisms and undermined community empowerment. This was further hampered by a lack of leadership from both internal and external stakeholders. Communication, as a fundamental aspect of leadership, is an expression of political capital with important consequences for social and trust elements.

Lack of leadership

240 Internal leadership conflict

- Many of the power conflicts in the local community were concerned with internal leadership issues, particularly within the Community Development Association, established in 1996 with the aim of working to access government funds and provide support to build community facilities and protect community safety (Wang, 2010). The president and leadership of the Community Development Association held significant power over local resources and benefits. It appears that the former head of the community controlled all power and exercised it through close trusted people who were members of the Community Development Association. A change in leadership following an election in 2003 only exacerbated the community divisions, and this event precipitated organisational fragmentation, as discussed below. This reflects how the negative exercise of political capital affected organisational power. Thus, it appears that leadership tactics were not consultative and tended towards the pressure end of the continuum identified by Yukl and Falbe (1990).

- 250 As a result, most of the residents were unhappy with the leadership ability offered by members of the community. Reed (1997) points out that an organisation leader should be highly capable and hold a significant position of power regarding decision-making about such activities as organisation operations, management, policy-making and planning, promotion and coordinating tourism affairs among different stakeholders within a local community. Yet one resident provided their views on the ability of the leadership of the associations:

- 260 Actually neither of the leaders of the two local associations have great ability. They and their associations are unable to negotiate and get things happening. I feel it's essential for a successful leader to be able to get other cadres under their authority to accept their leadership. (R7)

In particular, residents felt that this lack of leadership acted as a barrier towards effective planning. Frank and Smith (2006) indicate that a strong leadership needs to establish a clear development plan and policies, with vision and goals. Residents offered interesting comments on the lack of planning, and consideration of the tourist product:

- 265 In my opinion, a president must always have goals and long-term plans, but I didn't see any concrete action taken by him ... both associations merely provide accommodation, tour guide services, and food. They are unable to

touch tourists' hearts, or provide tourists with cultural or other experiences which fully engage them, body and mind. Hopefully, if we constantly extend ourselves, tourists will not only feel touched but richly experience the local culture. (R8)

270 These comments imply that there was insufficient planning and this exacerbated conflict centred around some of the core values and ideologies embodied by the ecotourism development and ecovillage vision. This is despite an awareness that the local community had a clearly defined sense of place that they wished to communicate to tourists, as evidenced in the last quote. Indeed this respondent seems to have a holistic appreciation of community assets included in the SLA and their
275 importance to the tourism product.

External leadership conflict

There was also evidence of external leadership conflict in the leadership role taken by the NGOs. Moscovici (1972) refers to conflicts which arise from different groups having different social representations. Close and Scherle (2007) demonstrate that power relationships between organisations such as
280 NGOs often rely on different cultures from those found in commercial transactions between businesses. This is evidenced by disagreements over the relative leadership role of the NHF and the Shih-Hsin University group during the rebuilding:

Both of them wanted the authority to control the direction taken by the community. The NHF thought Instructor N7 was invited to provide assistance, but Instructor N7 thought the NHF should only control the applications for funds rather than be involved in community operations and management. However, the NHF did not agree with N7 controlling the community operations and management because then the Foundation would probably lose control of the community. (R8)

Unfortunately, these conflicts also generated differences of opinion among key members of the community regarding perceptions of the NHF and the group from Shih-Hsin University.

290 In addition, the main direction of the development was towards an ecological village and ecotourism...leisure agriculture - which Instructor N7 is specialized in - was more or less ignored. Subsequently Instructor N7 was unhappy and withdrew from involvement with the community. This led to the community residents being unable to forgive the NHF; they thought that the NHF had driven Instructor N7 away. They said the Foundation's counselling teams were telling the residents to unify but divisions were in fact splitting the NHF itself. (R26)

295 These views of the conflict reflect that local residents were unhappy with the lack of leadership cooperation and misunderstanding between the NHF and Shih-Hsin University. The local residents did not know whose suggestions they should follow, and they criticised the NGOs saying that they had not been given adequate information to allow them to fully understand what the conflict was about. This led to local residents coming to distrust the NHF; these conflicts even made local residents doubt the professional ability, fairness and reliability of the NHF.
300

Leadership conflict between external and internal stakeholders

There was also leadership conflict between the NGOs and the community itself. The function of an NGO in community empowerment is to help the local community to drive a multi-faceted development from a starting point to diffusion through the whole community. This should encourage participation through having local people nominate new and old experiences to incorporate into the community environment and shared public memory (Southern, 1995), and connect with and engage other NGOs to cooperate and assist in community affairs. When, however, the role taken by the NHF was one at variance from these goals, its function as an NGO caused a number of conflicts with local residents. Some research studies have criticised the political capital of NGO groups participating in
305 community empowerment for their insufficient professionalism, cleavage and monopolisation, conceptual bias, competition for resources between the guidance groups, lack of international skill, uncertainty about their actual professional role and causing conflict and opposition (Lin, 2003). The NHF caused some conflicts surrounding its professional ability in the guidance of local residents.

- 315 Theoretically, the NHF should have still kept playing a counselling role, but they had not done anything. But the villagers readily complained, and that finally resulted in the situation evolving into a very serious conflict ... the NHF was snatching the resources, what they wanted was the money; the villagers saw right through this, and said that was all the NHF had come for. (N4)

Here it appears that the political capital inevitably had a direct impact on the financial assets of the community. Consequently, the lack of coordination, leadership and planning had a direct influence on the success of the ecotourism development. These social and political influences on the local economy, or political capital, had direct consequences when it comes to assessing changes to the livelihood opportunities for local people.

Social and political consequences

Organisational fragmentation

- 325 The fragmentation of organisations providing an administrative or political role is linked to these failures in leadership. The main consequence of power conflict was the setting up of a rival association to manage ecotourism in the Taomi community. This was a response from ecotourism operators who felt that their needs were not being met by the leadership struggles in the Community Development Association:

- 330 two or three years ago, the old Community Development Association was not working well at all ... I think it was never able to operate effectively and it almost stopped operating altogether, and many operators could not have taken that. (N1)

- This affected applications for funding from the public sector for construction and maintenance of tourism facilities, which was a major concern for tourism operators. However, this caused further misunderstandings among the community leadership; as the Taomi Ecotourism Association was set up at that sensitive time, it may have been perceived that this was done to grab a share of the local resources and benefits of the new Community Development Association. This generated increased organisational conflict between the Taomi Ecotourism Association and the local community government, as well as confusion and frustration among residents:

- 340 I think the main problem is that the original Community Development Association divided into two... I think the Community Development Association does not want the Ecotourism Association to share the big pie, so the Community Development Association is unwilling to release any of its power or advantages to the Ecotourism Association. The Community Development Association thinks that having another new association operating will take away income and their power. (N9)

- 345 A conflict issue thus arose about how the two associations divided responsibilities for public affairs. The leadership of the new Community Development Association gradually displayed an unco-operative attitude to public affairs, because its workload required more funds to be spent on maintaining public facilities (seen here as physical capital in the community). As a result, the relationship between the two associations broke down. This essentially implies that these conflicts also affected social capital in the form of the rupture of trust within the two associations -- political capital affected social capital. The above comments demonstrate that groups were considering their benefits, particularly as regards using power to control their access to benefits in the ecotourism industry. New conflicts destroyed opportunities for cooperation and catalysed deeper gaps and distrust between groups. This also translated into fragmentation of marketing and distribution channels, with the initial booking centre being challenged by multiple booking locations. The currently operating ecotourism industry has three groups competing within the ecotourism market; increasing the number of representations existing "in the context of group or social conflict" (Pearce et al., 1996, p. 94). There is a lack of trust between these groups and a reluctance to cooperate with each other. This implies that the two associations' powers and benefits were both diminished by the proliferation of individual portals. Similar problems in controlling booking channels have been highlighted in other examples

of community-based tourism development, for example in Indonesia (Cater, 2011). This implies that the negative political capital affected community harmony, another important social asset.

Lack of benefit sharing

Collapse of the community fund

365 Timothy (2002) describes a share in the benefits of tourism for all community members as the second pillar of empowerment. The community fund, an idea of the NGOs, was designed to contribute to public affairs such as through protecting the environment, and through the well-being of the elderly and disadvantaged groups. The initial community fund was operated by the original Community Development Association as a mechanism for running the ecotourism development and industry. Initially, contributions were voluntary, but significantly the president neither dealt with the non-cooperative operators, nor effected sanctions against any operator for not contributing to the community fund. However, as the fragmentation of associations ensued and the leadership struggles played out, individual needs took over:

375 When tourists first stayed in the home-stays, it was the ecotourism association which assigned the tourists to the operators, they had to contribute to the community fund. But when the tourists came again, we operators would give them our business cards and tell them to contact us operators directly. ... it is because everyone did not want to contribute as much as they had, wondering if they could stop making contributions altogether, or take money back. I think that was very selfish. (R15)

This issue was the one that drew most ecotourism operators' complaints following the split, and is not an uncommon problem (see Gascón, 2013; Morais et al., 2006; Schellhorn, 2010; Tucker, 2010). Most operators did not want to comply with the agreed community fund arrangement and donate to the community fund, and thereby to the Community Development Association. However, the result of the multiple distribution portals was that the ecotourism operators largely sought to go it alone and thus avoid any obligation to contribute to the community fund. Although some were members of both associations, they considered that association neither promoted their business nor provided business resources or links. They did not want to contribute to the community fund of either association:

390 what I mean by the portal is that the Community Development Association portal transfers tourists to me as an operator, and then I have to contribute five percent back ... if the operators are being asked to follow this model now, it will make things hard for them. As I mentioned, operators who accept cases privately do not contribute money to the fund. (R8)

It appears that the community fund gradually lost its capacity to function positively in public affairs. At the time the fieldwork was undertaken, the two associations operated the community fund but its ability to contribute towards community development projects was severely limited. Quite apart from the financial and physical capital contribution that the fund had made initially, perhaps more important was the further erosion of community communication that ensued through this issue, as identified by one of the stakeholders:

400 It is very difficult to communicate with the operators, and at that time none of them contributed to the community fund. I think it is really difficult to talk to them, so the Ecotourism Association and the Community Development Association are short of money, and having difficulty operating ... I think they are selfish people. (R4)

The community fund collapse affected community well-being and environmental protection issues; thus, the inappropriate exercise of political capital had a direct impact on the natural, physical and social capital.

Conflicts between groups of operators

405 This increasing individualism penetrated beyond the community fund, and became apparent in the operations of the tourism industry:

the operators in Taomi, they only look at how much their group can earn, and how many people will share the big pie. They should seriously value the idea of sustainable development, but I think the idea of sustainable development hasn't really entered their minds. (R19)

410 This comment implies that there are conflicts surrounding competition for resources between the various ecotourism operators, particularly home-stay operators and eco-guides. Further, it illustrates how, from the residents' perspective, an awareness of the importance of sustainability as a value-based expression of political capital was not evidenced by tourism operators, as manifested in the room limit.

415 in fact, while we were working for the Taomi community in the early days, it was agreed that all operators should share the big pie [benefit] and that no home-stays should have more than five rooms for guests. ... sharing the benefits was all about attracting more residents to more actively identify with their environment; encouraging the local residents to value and take the environment seriously because a good environment would bring the community money. The relationship is reciprocal. (R9)

420 The original rule limiting home-stay guest capacity was sound policy regarding the distribution of home-stay benefits; it strengthened social networks and trust between all the operators – the political capital influencing the community's social and financial capital. Moreover, the rule acted to consolidate the community environmental identification of all the residents. However, as Taomi gained a reputation for its ecotourism development, more tourists were attracted and arrived. More local residents and new outside investors joined in, and the ecotourism industry expanded. But when the new or outside investors began home-stay businesses, many had more than five rooms for guests, and there was a change in the way that the home-stays were part of the community:

430 Due to the competition, a lot of home-stays wanted to quickly become five-star hotels ... Basically, I think a home-stay should feel like being in someone's home. That's what a real home-stay should be like. But now the home-stays are changing, wanting to become like grand hotels, I can feel the competition between the local home-stays and hotels; the tourists now have more choices open to them. (R18)

The outside investors violated the standard originally established for home-stays, creating unfair competition, essentially at odds with minimising impact. The fragmented associations had no effective way to limit the competition presented by the outside or new operators. These conflicts fundamentally arose from having organisational leadership that abandoned the originally agreed rule setting a five-guestroom limit for all home-stays, to thereby cooperate and share out benefits among all the operators.

Residents' exclusion

440 Although most residents did not participate in the ecotourism education and training programme as described earlier, there were some residents who joined in the ecotourism activities to find out more about the ecotourism development. When it became apparent that the benefits of ecotourism were not being shared, some residents began to complain:

I don't think anyone is acting cooperatively running the community organizations ... they pay more attention to personal benefits. (R17)

445 However, one ecotourism operator put this down to a lack of entrepreneurial skills:

Looking at the whole community there are many people who have not participated in ecotourism.. they have not attended the education sessions, how to get involved in an ecotourism industry. So, those are the residents who say we [ecotourism operators] are just making money for ourselves. They are all jealous of the ecotourism operators. (R15)

450 These benefit-related conflicts reflect that the ecotourism industry had not taken care to provide all residents with some means of livelihood or extend their economic resources. As a result, people not participating in ecotourism were jealous of the ecotourism operators, as there was uneven distribution of benefits from tourism development.

Conclusion

455 Comparisons of the findings in this study with those of other researchers raise many implications. In particular this study offers new insights into political elements of the SLA, which we would propose as a discrete category worthy of attention. This should not be seen as weakening the model, as it should be clear from this case that the model works because each aspect of sustainable livelihoods is highly interdependent. Rather, we call for a less reductionist and more politically nuanced understanding of tourism development, in line with the work of authors such as Mosedale (2011) and Church and Coles who have suggested that "tourism analysis requires a more direct consideration of power, and moreover that this should take place within meaningful and theoretically informed frameworks of analysis" (2007, p. 272). Indeed, it is notable that the earliest models of the SLA did suggest that there was room for both cultural (or symbolic) and political capital in the assessment of community assets (Baumann, 2000; Scoones, 1998). This paper has underlined the importance of the latter, therefore combining this study with former work we suggest that the assets base of the SLA should be considered as a heptagonal framework (Figure 1).

The high degree of self-interest demonstrated in this particular case shows that it is important to critique the "ownership" of ecotourism and sustainable tourism development (i.e. the extent to which community stakeholders feel like subjects in tourism development, and not just like objects). Further it is important that ecotourism and sustainable tourism terminology are not placed on a pedestal, which seems to have occurred in many situations. Clearly, ecotourism should not be seen as a cure-all, for it often "reflects a diminished and constrained vision of the possibilities for rural development" (Butcher, 2007, p. 146), and is often vulnerable to misinterpretation, misappropriation and misdirection (Cater, 2004), as is evident in this case. This also highlights the importance of work by Fennell (2006) on ethics and values in tourism, and the need for frameworks for development to encompass and reflect the value positions of host communities. Furthermore, examples such as Taomi are always open to external exploitation; indeed, there are many parallels to the case described by Schellhorn (2010) on Lombok, Indonesia, where ecotourism development ultimately benefits external stakeholders at the expense of the local population. In the present example, it is clear that Taomi suffered from the imposition of external agendas for tourism development from conflicting groups, even though there was a strong appreciation of locally based sustainable tourism from some residents, as shown in the section on internal leadership conflict.

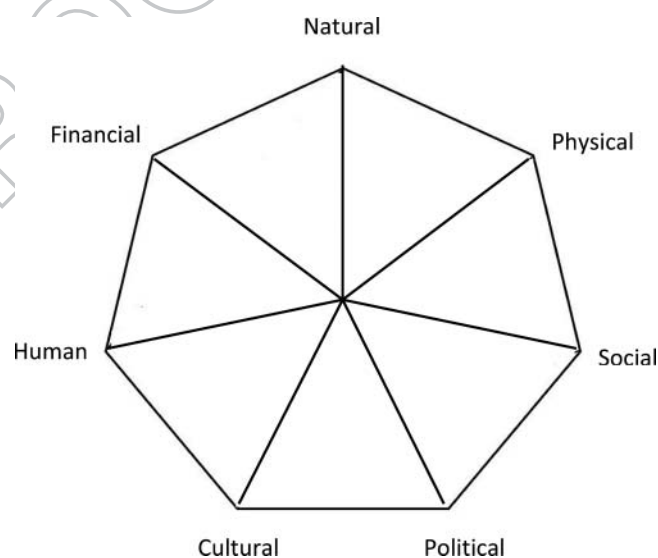


Figure 1. Revised livelihood assets in the sustainable livelihoods framework.

Despite the high degree of conflict and lack of political capital, the development of tourism has nevertheless provided livelihood options for a significant proportion of the local community, which was facing rural decline even without the earthquake damage (Wang & Cater, 2015). However, the lack of development of internal networks and cooperation towards meaningful empowerment within the destination did not allow the community to fully broaden these options. In this sense then, a livelihoods approach was not taken, as the NGOs tasked with development did not pay full attention to the breadth of community assets, preferring to follow a blinkered path to ecotourism development. It was not the purpose of this paper to examine broader governance options for ecotourism that have since emerged in Taiwanese government policy, however, an aspect that has been discussed in detail elsewhere are the long timeframes that are required for effective community tourism development. It would seem that in this case there was a rush to develop tourism livelihoods following the natural disaster, which ultimately led to the detriment of collaborative outcomes.

Work elsewhere suggests that community-based tourism development is a long, and never-ending undertaking which requires sustained commitment, with many years of preliminary activities required before successful projects can be implemented (e.g. Calumpang, 2000; Hctor, 2003). Therefore, in the particular case of disaster response, attention needs to be paid both to the development of political capital and to the opportunity of "bridging" livelihood options that would allow for this. Nevertheless, it is important that there is a growing body of work, such as this case, which illustrate the challenges of ecotourism development, particularly those that catalogue the opinions and experiences of the non-western hosts onto which this development has been imposed. Indeed, the development of further frameworks for the development of ecotourism from a non-western perspective would provide a fruitful avenue for future research. To improve outcomes, feasibility guidelines for designing tourism projects, or policies for implementation, must take into account the political agendas of community organisations and societal groups, as well as of individuals (Fennell & Dowling, 2003; Hall, Jenkins, & Kearsley, 1997; Scheyvens, 1999; Sofield, 2003). Through exploring the political and value laden micro-environment of ecotourism development there will emerge better guidelines for more sustainable livelihood options for vulnerable communities.

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